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The Conversion of the Debt and the Jesuits' Bill
Defended and Explained.

From the Sherbrooke "Examiner," Aug. 24, 1888.

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The Provincial Premier went to Coaticook, on Wednesday, to open the Fair there, but owing to the very rainy weather the formal opening was postponed until the following day.

He addressed a very large audience at Shurtleff's hall in the evening in English upon the questions now agitating the Province, viz., the conversion of the debt, the formation of the National party, and the Jesuits' estates settlement. The meeting was composed of members of both political parties, and we are informed that Mr. Mercier's explanations were very satisfactory and were warmly received. He first touched upon the revolt in the North-West, claiming that according to constitutional rule the responsibility for it rested on the Government of the day and that if the Ottawa Government had rendered justice to the Metis, who were composed of French, Scotch and English half-breeds, there would have been no revolt. Speaking of the cry that he was opposed to fair play to the Protestants, he remarked:

"I have done everything to render justice to the minority in this Province. When Protestants in Montreal asked me to give public money for one of their public institutions, I did it. And when I asked the Eastern Townships to send one man to be a Minister of the Province for my Government—who refused it? The Protestant and English electors of the Eastern Townships. And as a matter of fact who put down the Joly Government? It was not the Catholics. Joly was a Protestant, a French Protestant. He became Prime Minister and received our support in the most generous way. He did not lose a single French Liberal vote. And who voted against him? The Protestants of the Eastern Townships. Who made the motion to defeat the Joly Government? Mr. Lynch, a representative of the

Eastern Townships and a Protestant. We, the French Liberals, sustained a French Protestant and the English members of the House voted against him. Therefore, how have we prejudices against the English and the Protestants? I will go a little further. Whenever a question was brought into the House during the last session and the session before, who stood up for the rights of the minority? We, the members of the National party. And who accused us of sustaining the Protestants? The French Tories; and we were not sustained by the English Tories; on the contrary they did everything to prevent us from rendering justice to the minority in this Province. And to-day, sir, if there is no portfolio in the hands of an English-speaking Protestant Minister, whose fault is it? George Washington Stephens is a man of wealth and of irreproachable public character, and he was defeated by whom? By the *Montreal Gazette*, by the Tories of Montreal. And it was perfectly known that this gentleman was to become one of the Ministry. You had in Megantic one of the best Scotch Protestants that we ever had in the House: John Whyte. It was known that this gentleman had good chances of having a portfolio in my Government, and by whom was he defeated? By the English Protestant Tories. And they were not satisfied to have defeated him at the polls; they disqualified him because they knew I was about to ask him to become a Minister. And the Protestants will come and say "The National Party has been formed against the Protestants and English-speaking population;" no, it is not so, and there is not an honest man here or elsewhere in the Province who believes this assertion. It is false, and they know that if I was weak in the Province two years ago it was because I wanted justice for all and wanted to render justice to the minority in this Province; and I hope it will be understood by the Protestants here that I am their friend, that I am disposed to render justice to them as I want justice myself. And, sir, I am so disposed to do justice that I ask justice for myself, and I will never submit to any authority here or elsewhere that would commit an injustice.

CONVERSION OF THE PROVINCIAL DEBT.

The second question is the conversion of the debt:

Of course, gentlemen, nothing good can be done by me. It is perfectly understood, if you believe the *Montreal Gazette* and the other Tory papers in Montreal and Quebec, that I can do nothing good. I thought one day, after a trip to Europe, that it would be a good stroke of business to effect what is called a conversion of the debt. Seeing the state of the money market, I said: I may obtain a reduction in the interest of our debt of twenty-two million dollars, which is partly due in Paris and partly in London, the greater part in London. I saw that some of the colonies had converted their debts by exchanging their debentures bearing five per cent for debentures bearing four per cent; I said I will try and do the same.

Then I consulted some very important financial firms in London and Paris and I thought I could carry out the operation. My scheme was very simple: borrow twenty million dollars at three and a half or perhaps three per cent, and exchange those new debentures for the old ones bearing five per cent, if the bondholders were disposed to accept; if not, pay them cash, if possible. They have given us \$90 for \$100 debentures. I will go to them and say "you refuse those bonds of \$100 at three or three and a half per cent instead of the ones bearing five per cent, but you ought not to refuse the money: you have given us \$90, here are \$100 for your bonds." What was the answer? "you are going to rob the English bondholders." Rob them, how? "they have given me \$90, I give them \$100." "Yes," they say, "but there is a contract by which it is said that you will not be able to redeem your debentures before a certain date." That is not a fact; it is a lie; there is no such contract. The obligation consists of a promissory note, which we call a debenture. It is a promise to pay in the year 1904 \$100 at five per cent interest. Does that take away the law which says that a debtor is at liberty to pay before maturity unless there is a special condition to the contrary? You lend me \$500 dollars at five per cent for one year: I give you my promissory note. In three months I have money, I go to you; I say, "here are \$500. You cannot refuse it unless there is a stipulation to the contrary." This is the whole question. But you know, it is not the English bondholders who have made all this noise and fuss; it is Sir John Macdonald and the *Montreal Gazette*. It is a terrible thing to allow Mr. Mercier, to allow this abominable National Government, to save \$225,000 a year in interest! How can Sir John, how can the *Montreal Gazette*, allow this abominable Government to save \$225,000 a year and expend this saving for agricultural purposes, for colonization purposes and for public instruction (laughter and cheers). Instead of sending \$225,000 over to England, I said, I will divide it into three shares: one-third will go to encourage agriculture; books will be furnished, new districts opened, agricultural shows encouraged, prizes established for cheese and butter. This one-third instead of being sent to England will go to our farmers, the sons of the land, to improve one of the best and most fertile lands in the world. They say everywhere, in every county, there is not enough money to make good roads. Poor settlers in the backwoods cannot get communication with the great centres, they cannot sell their cordwood, they cannot bring their produce to market. We take one third and give it to stimulate the growth and development of our own country. And as to the other third we will say to the school municipalities, who have poor school houses, not fit to be school houses: "You are poor, we will help you to build a nice comfortable school house: the Government will pay a quarter or a half of its cost. You do not pay enough to your teachers: \$60 or \$70 a year is not sufficient remuneration; we will raise the standard of the teachers by giving them better remuneration, and we will pay them \$200 a year. We will pay one third of this salary to help your schools to give a good, practical and Christian education to your

children." But, gentlemen, we have no right to do that because this Government cannot rule this Province; this Province must submit to the rule of Sir John Macdonald. "If you dare, Mr. Mercier, to go on with that law, it will be vetoed by the executive authorities. We cannot put you out, you are in power to stay, but we can annihilate your laws and prevent you from making good laws for the people who support you." Well, sir, let them try it! (Applause.) I will not say anything more on this point; but if God leaves me health, strength and energy I will effect the conversion of the debt. I will put the large amount of money that may be saved by the conversion scheme into agriculture, colonization and public instruction; and if the people of this country are disposed to help me we will go on together to make a great country of the Province of Quebec; we will develop its natural resources, give a good, sound, practical and Christian education to your children, we will give fair salaries to teachers, and place our Province in the noble position it has a right to aspire to.

THE JESUITS' ESTATES.

The other scheme is the most abominable of all: the settlement of the Jesuits' estates.

At the beginning, when the French commenced to settle this country, they sent the Jesuits here. Those Jesuits came here poor. They went through the forests, passed over the mountains and were the first everywhere, with the Gospel in their hands, trying to make Christians of the Indians. It was perfectly known that the Jesuits were always ahead of the French soldiers. It was perfectly known that in many and many cases French soldiers who were taken prisoners by the Indians were delivered by those missionaries, those Jesuits, who were living with the Indians. One day the kings of France desired to give them some property in order that they might build some schools and colleges. They gave them one of the finest properties in the city of Quebec, now called the "Barracks property." They gave them some other property around Quebec, around Three Rivers and around Montreal. The Jesuits bought some other properties later on as they needed them and they received donations from generous citizens in this country.

It was so, gentlemen, when England took Canada in 1759. The Jesuits were then incorporated under the French law. There was nothing in the law of England, nothing in the proclamations, nothing in the laws of Canada, that prevented those Jesuits from being incorporated; there was nothing in the laws or proclamations that prevented those Jesuits from keeping those estates. It went on in that way until 1773, when the Pope Clement XIV abolished the order all through Christendom. The matter stood that way until 1800, that is to say, very nearly fifty years after the conquest and twenty-five years after the abolition of the order by the Pope. Under the reign of George III, a warrant was issued stating that, by reason

of conquest and confiscation, the Jesuits' property belonged to the Crown; and the Government took possession of it in 1800. A kind of settlement was afterwards effected and went into the laws of the country, and in 1867, at the time of Confederation, the Canadian Government was in possession of the greatest part of this real estate. Now mark this—during all the period from the year 1800 to 1867, during 67 years, the Catholic clergy protested against what they called an injustice. They said those estates did not belong to the Crown, that these estates belonged to the Church, and they ought to be returned to the Church, because, according to the modern laws, there is no confiscation of private property by right of conquest. This is clear, and the statement that these properties were confiscated is not only against law but against the treaty of Paris by which the cession of Canada was made. Now, gentlemen, let us not judge the merits of the question at present, but remember that from 1800 to 1867 protests were received every three or four years from the Catholic religious authorities, from the Pope and from the bishops, and that at the time the settlement was so difficult that the authorities did not know what to do. In 1867 Confederation took place. In 1874 and 1875 the greater part of the property was returned to the Province of Quebec, except the Champ de Mars in Montreal, which was kept by the Federal authorities and is still kept by them since 1867. I may say nearly every year the Catholics have asked these estates for school purposes. What do I find in 1876? A formal promise by the Government of the time to settle this question. The promise is registered at Rome, the promise is registered here, and when I came into power I was placed face to face with the difficulty, and in such a position, sir, that I had either to refuse to fulfill the promise of my predecessors or forfeit it. I thought, sir, that honor was the best policy, and that even upon such a delicate question I was obliged to effect a settlement in order to extricate the Province from so great a difficulty, and when I went to Rome I asked the Pope what he was inclined to do? Well, of course, he asked for the restitution of the property. I said I could not do that, but, I said, we are living in a mixed community; I am ready to submit a scheme to the House by which we can pay so much to Protestants and so much to Catholics in order to have a final settlement of the question, and it would be on these conditions: that we would give a part to the Protestants to be distributed by themselves for their schools, the other part to the Catholics to be distributed by you, to be used in the Province for educational purposes; that we will have from you a final cession of all the rights that the Church or the Jesuits may claim upon this property; and we will have a final settlement and will never hear any more of the difficulty." Of course, this was bold. I am attacked. Why? Because, they say, we had no business to settle this difficulty with the Pope. But if I had no business to deal with the matter why did my predecessors make proposals to settle it? Do you think it was my duty to fulfill the engagement of my predecessors? When they promised \$100,000 to settle the McGowan case, I

matter, we owe justice to poor missionaries; we should fulfill the promises they made to poor priests as well as the promises made to rich banks.

Is this all? Well, no; when I brought the measure before the House you may suppose, gentlemen, that, hearing what had been stated by the *Montreal Gazette*, there was a battle there. Still the vote was unanimous; both parties agreed to acknowledge their satisfaction with the settlement, and if I am guilty, all the Tories in the House are guilty (applause), and if the Protestants are not satisfied with my party, why should they be satisfied with their friends in the House who voted with us? No, I did well; it is perfectly well known that I have settled a great and difficult question with the consent of both parties in the House. But, gentlemen, don't forget that I have no right to do anything good; that is not my business! The Tories claim I have been placed there to do mischief. If I do anything good they will go for me, because they don't want me to receive a backing in the Province of Quebec. The National party must be crushed because it is opposed by Sir John Macdonald! Let him crush it if he can! In the meantime I have settled that question and, thank God, it is settled forever. But we are told that the law states that the sanction of the representative of Her Majesty will not be sufficient to put it into force, but that it must also receive the sanction of the Pope. That is nonsense, there is nothing of the kind. Those who say that know they say a lie.

The truth is this; according to the Catholic doctrine, the ownership of all religious properties is vested in the Church at large and, desiring to make a final settlement, I had to make it with the Pope, who is the recognized Head of the Church. The Pope, being unable to deal with me in person, appointed a special attorney. After the papers were signed by the attorney, I thought prudent to have them ratified by the principal, the Pope. That is all! Where is the harm? Where is the insult done to the Queen or her representative? (Applause.)

In answer to some queries of some Protestant gentlemen as to the disposal of the \$60,000 allotted to the Protestants, the Premier gave the following explanation:

In the law, of course, we placed a clause that the Protestants were entitled to \$60,000 for their share to be used for educational purposes; and the clause says that the money will be given over to the Protestant Committee of the Council of Public Instruction to be distributed according to the wishes of the Protestants. We have nothing to do with it; we have but to hand it to the Committee and they will divide the money as they like for the benefit of their educational institutions. And we have been authorized to sell the Jesuits' estates, and with regard to this fine property in Quebec, I am already in communication with the municipal authorities in Quebec with the hope that they will take the greater part of this property to build a splendid city hall. There are other properties in different parts of the Province. We will sell them as well as we can, and the proceeds will be used to pay these \$460,000.

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